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A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL AND THE STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

LINDSAY NELSEN

On December 11, 1977, Amnesty International became the first human rights Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, a recognition which gave the group a certain global legitimacy. During the award presentation, Amnesty was praised for its global efforts to "defend human dignity against violence and subjugation" (Korey 156). Since receiving the prize, Amnesty's membership has grown considerably, as has its influence over governments and intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations. Amnesty International's influence in pressuring governments to implement international human rights laws and as a source of reliable apolitical human rights information has resulted from hard work, vision, and careful strategy. Amnesty has gained influence, in questions of political prisoners, disappearances, and the use of torture, through its apolitical agenda, its direct and flexible approach, its reliable collection of information, and the direct involvement of its members. Amnesty's influence is also derived from the basis of its goals in international human rights law, giving it increased legitimacy in the eyes of the governments of the world.

A NEW VISION AND THE "CURIOUS GRAPEVINE"

The end of World War II came the beginning of a new, international political era. The once great powers of Germany and Japan were under occupation. France was relatively weak, Britain was no longer the supreme power, and the United States of America and the Soviet Union were the new great powers. There was great hope that this new era would be one of peace, prosperity and cooperation between states. With this hope in mind, fifty-one countries signed the United Nations charter as founding members on June 26, 1945 (UN). Three years later, the members signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration proclaimed that all people are entitled to a

wide range of social, economic, cultural, and humanitarian rights (Amnesty). While these developments were hailed as a victory for human rights, it soon became evident that states were too busy worrying about other issues like the Cold War to deal with the implementation of the declaration; it also became clear that many states were not very eager to implement the vision anyways. Human rights were not only a problem of the developing world—the problem spanned the entire globe, including Western states that had always prided themselves as the leaders on such questions.

In November 1960, a British lawyer named Peter Benenson came up with the idea that “prisoners of conscience could be released by writing letters to government(s)” (Korey, et.al. 160). This idea came to him while he was reading about two Portuguese students who were jailed for seven years for criticizing the Salazar Dictatorship of Portugal. Benenson was so outraged that these two students had been imprisoned for merely expressing their opinions that he decided to take action. With Eric Baker and Louis Blom-Cooper, he started a campaign called “Appeal for Amnesty, 1961.” This group urged the release of who Benenson called prisoners of conscience, those imprisoned simply for expressing their opinions. With the aid of the editor of an influential newspaper, the campaign became very public and extended the issue to other parts of the globe where similar situations existed. The work was noticed by newspapers all over the world and thousands of letters of support were sent to Benenson’s office. Groups were put in touch with each other and encouraged to adopt their own group of three prisoners to campaign for. Local chapters quickly grew in the West. In February of 1962, delegates from the chapters decided to make the one-year temporary campaign into a permanent organization that they called Amnesty International. At this point, the organization was focused on working toward the release of prisoners of conscience, fair trials for political prisoners, and the ending of torture; however Amnesty would soon become an organization devoted to a wide range of human rights (Korey 160-164; also Cook 181-184). Eleanor Roosevelt predicted that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would be implemented through a “curious grapevine.” While she did not define what she meant by this phrase, it quickly became evident that the grapevine was that of nongovernmental organizations. This “curious grapevine” would be led by the candlelight of Amnesty International and other human rights NGOs throughout the world (Korey 48).

STRUCTURE, STRATEGY, AND SELF REGULATION

Since its founding in 1962, Amnesty International has been careful to uphold its own standards, particularly those which concern information gathering, decision making, and politics. Amnesty has put enormous focus on the means it uses to achieve its goals, as these may directly impact its future legitimacy and influence. Amnesty’s constant independence from governments and the reliability of its information has been crucial to its success.

Amnesty International long ago established rules that govern its fact-finding missions to countries suspected of human rights violations. No missions are sent to any country secretly. All must be officially approved by the country. While a mission is in a country investigating possible violations, no comments are permitted to be made to the media. Upon the return of the investigators to their London offices, a report is submitted to Amnesty's International Executive Committee. It is this committee that prepares and releases a full report that makes public findings and recommendations (Korey 163-4). These procedures ensure the accuracy of information before it is released and make sure that Amnesty's message is consistent. Amnesty also avoids taking credit for the release of prisoners to avoid both underestimating the roles of others and to avoid furthering embarrassing governments, as this could prove counterproductive to future efforts (Korey 169).

Throughout its history, Amnesty has strived to maintain its independence, particularly in the area of finance. Amnesty is one of the only European human rights NGOs that has refused to accept funds from any government, fearing that its "independence and integrity" would be compromised. In fact, the organization debated whether to accept the Nobel Peace Prize because of the financial award of 80,000 pounds attached to it. In the end, Amnesty decided to accept it to help pay for future administrative expansion (Korey 170). Beyond that award, Amnesty is financed by dues paid by its members as well as donations from private individuals and foundations (Amnesty).

Amnesty places great emphasis on the reliability of its information, since collected information is considered the basic source of its strength. Amnesty prides itself on its reliable, carefully collected, and organized information. The research department of the organization collects, assembles, and checks all of the information using a wide variety of sources and contacts to ensure that its information is correct (Korey 166). This process gives increased credibility to Amnesty's information.

Another key component of the organization is the "intensely personal commitment" felt by its members (Thakur 158). Amnesty has been effective in maintaining the personal connections between its members and those it seeks to protect by involving the members in every part of the release process. Members are involved from the beginning, through both the letter writing campaigns and their direct action in lobbying governments and other bodies (Korey 168). As an organization, it is important for Amnesty to maintain this personal connection, because it allows its members to feel that they, as individuals, are contributing to the efforts of the entire organization.

Finally, Amnesty has been careful to maintain balance in its campaigns. For example, in its campaign to release prisoners of conscience, Amnesty encourages national groups to "adopt" three prisoners, one from the developed world and two from less developed regions, emphasizing the global scale of the

problem as well as preventing accusations that it is using human rights to pursue its own political agenda (Keck and Sikkink 88). Placing emphasis on human rights, rather than the adoption of certain forms of government is particularly important for chapters in developing nations. Human rights, not political change, have always been and will remain Amnesty's key focus.

THE POWER OF PUBLICITY: WHY GOVERNMENTS LISTEN

When Amnesty began its year-long campaign in 1962 to release prisoners of conscience, through targeted letter writing to governments, there were many skeptics (Thakur 158). To many, the idea that a group of common citizens could bring about political change by writing letters to repressive governments seemed foolish and hopelessly idealistic. After all, these critics believed that repressive governments had no reason to listen to foreign complaints. Governments around the world had continued to imprison people for political reasons and use torture despite international law advocating otherwise. States and their leaders showed little concern for the Declaration of Human Rights, which had never been implemented to begin with.

Surprising many skeptics, Amnesty's early letter campaigns combined with missions sent to the countries to plead at the highest level for the release for prisoners often met with success. What brought success was the question of state embarrassment—a weakness that Amnesty quickly found. Amnesty capitalized on the fact that even the most repressive governments have an interest in maintaining a positive public image. Governments do not like to be criticized by outsiders, particularly when the issue of human rights violations is raised. International criticism is extremely embarrassing and feared by many regimes who are willing to make small changes to avoid it.

Since its inception, many of Amnesty's letter writing campaigns and humanitarian state visits have been successful. In 1962, a mission to Czechoslovakia convinced the Foreign Minister to release Archbishop Josef Beran, who "had been held incommunicado" by the regime. Another mission to Ghana led then-President Kwame Nkrumah to release 152 of his political opponents (Korey 163). In 1964, the Irish government freed 37 prisoners on Human Rights Day, and Romania released thousands more. Between 1967 and 1968, 293 more prisoners were released because of the work of Amnesty International (Korey 164). By 1977, Amnesty had adopted 15,000 prisoners and helped to win the release of nearly half of them. As UN Secretary-General Ennals noted, "the coincidence rate between the cases... taken up and the people released is simply high" (Korey 165).

While Amnesty's letter campaigns and humanitarian missions are key to winning prisoner releases, the collection and distribution of human rights information has become the organization's most important focus. This information is often used to create international pressure for change in a

government's actions. Although Amnesty has been able to win the release of or better treatment for many political prisoners through simple campaigns, on occasion, the abuses have been so extensive that Amnesty has been unable to secure change without significant pressure from other governments. In many cases, Amnesty has been able to use its collected information to build international awareness and push for change. For example, it was this combination of domestic and international pressure that helped Amnesty bring about human rights changes in Argentina.

Argentina

Following the military coup of 1976, the new regime attempted to hide its human rights violations by "disappearing" its political opponents instead of publicly arresting and executing them. By secretly kidnapping, detaining, and executing its victims, the Argentine military hoped to avoid the international isolation that had been imposed on the Chilean dictatorship when it publicly imprisoned and executed large numbers of people (Keck and Sikkink 103-105). The Argentine dictatorship also practiced torture on an unprecedented scale during its "dirty war" against a wide variety of individuals it deemed a threat (Korey 178).

In the early stage of Argentine rule, when the disappearances were minimal, the regime permitted Amnesty to send in a mission (Korey 179). Argentina's leaders hoped that the mission would help to lessen increasing international criticism of the regime. Amnesty released a report in March of 1977 which documented a large number of abuses by the regime. The report criticized the regime for its abuses and demonstrated that the disappearances were part of a campaign to torture, interrogate, and secretly execute large numbers of people for political reasons (Keck and Sikkink 104). Amnesty's report was particularly useful because of its detailed and factual account. It listed the names, dates, and locations of many of the killings (Korey 179). It also estimated that between 2,000 and 10,000 people had been abducted and 6,000 political prisoners taken (Keck and Sikkink 104). Amnesty's report led the American Carter Administration and the leaders of France, Italy, and Switzerland to condemn the human rights violations and begin to put pressure on the regime.

While the Argentine government denied the legitimacy of the international human rights concerns for a number of years, in 1978, the military regime began to take measures to slowly improve its human rights in order to stem criticism from abroad. Argentine leaders were eager to improve the regime's global image and win back the military and economic aid it had lost. In 1985, two years after Argentina returned to a democratic government, Argentina was able to try the leaders responsible for the abuses. Thus, what started as Amnesty's campaign eventually resulted in positive change and a government more friendly to human rights (Keck and Sikkink 107-109).

In accordance with its policy, Amnesty International did not take credit for the success. The work of many other human rights organizations was essential to the campaign, in particular the done by organizations within Argentina. Domestic human rights organizations such as The Mothers of the Playa de Mayo and political exiles provided a great deal of information to organizations and governments (Keck and Sikkink 106-109).

STANDARD-SETTING, IMPLEMENTATION, AND THE UNITED NATIONS

The international human rights system is fundamental to Amnesty's credibility and legitimacy. Human rights treaties and other standards provide a "consistent and uniform code" by which Amnesty assesses every government. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights remains one of the most important of these treaties by noting the most basic rights that states must afford their citizens (Cook 183). Since Amnesty relies on such legislation for its support, it has always been adamant in involving itself in the drafting of international human rights legislation. Since the creation of the United Nations, Amnesty has played a vital role as an awareness builder, consultant, and provider of information. In this way, Amnesty hopes to ensure that there remains a global consensus on the need for human rights protection in international law.

Amnesty has concentrated on strengthening human rights standards at the United Nations. Amnesty was particularly active in pushing for a United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment to implement Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This Convention was passed in 1984. Amnesty was also active in drafting the Optional Protocol to the Convention on Torture, and has been involved in a wide variety of UN committees, including a one focused on crime (Cook 189-93).

Amnesty International has gained great influence at the United Nations. As a non-state actor lacking any formal power, Amnesty uses this forum to speak to varied governments. Amnesty has an interesting policy of supporting certain policy aspects at the United Nations rather than specific versions of resolutions. Doing this avoids questions of creditability for both Amnesty and the particular resolutions (Cook 183- 87).

Amnesty International's role extends far beyond the halls of the United Nations; it not only helps to write new human rights law, but also plays a role in ensuring that the legislation, conventions, and treaties that the United Nations approves are in fact implemented. The organization was recently involved in lobbying for a UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, an effort which was vital to the creation of the position (Cook 192).

While Amnesty has established itself as a reliable and independent human rights consultant to the United Nations and to governments across the globe, it often faces enormous challenges in gaining access to certain United Nations' meetings and conferences. Many of the informal meetings between governments where vital human rights decisions are made are not open to NGOs, making it difficult for Amnesty to exert influence. Amnesty has also found it difficult to work in an area where politics and compromise are commonplace. Many times, Amnesty must choose between making no progress on a human rights standard and supporting a standard that is lower than its own. Although some of Amnesty's positions go further than international law, in most cases Amnesty tries to stick with the positions ratified by international bodies. Thus, Amnesty's work at the United Nations can have high stakes, as the resolutions approved there can directly affect its own positions (Helena 209-211).

THE LIMITS OF INFLUENCE

Despite the fact that Amnesty International has been successful in many of its efforts, large obstacles still remain to human rights improvement in some areas. Amnesty's strategy, which uses publicity and pressure to improve human rights, has been more effective in some countries than it has been in others. The success of Amnesty's strategy depends on an individual government's vulnerability to international pressure and publicity. Some governments accused of human rights violations have managed to avoid significant international pressure from other governments, because these governments have deemed continued good relations with the abusive state more important than the human rights situation. Since September 11, 2001, and the American "War on Terror," some governments have escaped international criticism by assisting with the fight against terrorism. One example is the American partnership with Pakistan, a notorious human rights violator; Pakistan assists the U.S. in its fight against terrorism and in return the U.S. ignores how the Pakistani government chooses to run its internal affairs. Another example is the longstanding U.S. partnership with Saudi Arabia (Mertus 373). It is also apparent that some governments place little value on their image, caring only about the extent of their political control. It is very difficult for Amnesty to influence such governments.

Another obstacle to human rights improvement is the insufficient number of domestic human rights organizations in some developing states. As evidenced in the example from Latin America, information gathered by domestic NGOs is often essential to the success of international human rights campaigns. They provide information to the outside world, helping to induce international and domestic pressure. In countries where human rights movements are less organized or persecuted, it is much more difficult for organizations like Amnesty to become aware of violations and take action. With these vital components to change missing, human rights violations are often times not addressed. Judging by its numbers of domestic human rights

organizations, Latin America seems to have a far better record of human rights than other developing regions. A directory compiled in 1981 of organizations concerned with human rights and social justice in the developing world listed 220 in Latin America, but only 145 in Asia and 123 each in Africa. Therefore, Amnesty's success in Argentina must be understood in the context of highly disparate regional situations (Keck and Sikkink 92).

CONCLUSION

Although there are challenges to Amnesty's success, it seems clear that the organization has managed to influence many governments to improve human rights. There has been significant progress: the language of human rights is now commonplace, consensus on human rights remains considerable, and dictators can no longer claim interference in domestic affairs to avoid dealing with incriminations (Florini 178). Amnesty's success in improving human rights has resulted from its principles, strategy, connections, and reliable apolitical information gathering. While other actors have often been involved in achieving change, it is Amnesty International that has led that global fight. What began as one attorney's vision has become a legitimate global institution leading the fight to protect human rights. Amnesty sought to light the candle of hope, but instead they lit a fire.

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